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SUBJECT: Hesse Integration Emphasizes German Language, Culture

SUMMARY

1. (U) Beginning this month, Hesse becomes the first state in Germany to mandate German-language pre-school instruction in public schools, part of a broader campaign by the CDU government to promote German language and culture among the state's large immigrant community (12% of the total population). Reflecting this approach, the state's 2004 budget sharply cuts funding for foreign-language programs and NGOs that work on immigrant issues. Some critics applaud Hesse's focus on German language but think that its hardline assimilationist stance will counter integration efforts by marginalizing immigrant culture.

END SUMMARY.

Hesse Integration Emphasizes Language, Cuts Social Programs

2. (U) Hesse is introducing a year of mandatory German-language training prior to the beginning of primary school for children with insufficient German language skills. The state government will actively discourage those who do not pass this course from beginning their education. Older children entering Hesse will be asked to pass a German entrance exam before attending school. Students already enrolled in Hesse schools who exhibit an obvious language deficit will be asked to enroll in intensive German training concurrent with their normal course load.

3. (U) Hesse Social Ministry Head of Integration Dr. Walter Kindermann believes the classes will help integrate Hesse's immigrants and propagate German culture. Kindermann asserts that promoting these values is essential to the success of integration efforts. Language education is the centerpiece of a media campaign called "Hesse without borders," which aims at promoting the state's openness to international business and its approach to cultural concerns.

4. (U) Hesse's 2004 budget includes deep cuts in assistance for NGOs that work on immigrant issues. Social Ministry officials maintain that these groups often "agitate against the state government" (e.g., protests against the refugee holding center at Frankfurt airport), and should not receive taxpayer money to sponsor their efforts. The government has also dramatically scaled back support for foreign-language social counseling for its immigrant population. They expect the cuts to stand, pointing to the lack of public outcry after Baden-Wuerttemberg eliminated similar programs last year. Officials highlight the fact that, even with the cuts, the current CDU administration is spending more on integration than Hesse's previous SPD/Green coalition government.

5. (U) Frankfurt, Hesse's largest and most diverse city, (almost 27% of the population does not hold a German passport) has a major focus on language and assimilation. Frankfurt Commissioner for Integration Albrecht Magen cites the Frankfurt initiative "Mama learns German", which provides German-language training for immigrant mothers, as an important success. The program is completely funded by Frankfurt and has become the template for similar initiatives in Stuttgart and other cities across Germany. Frankfurt Chairwoman for Multicultural Affairs Helga Nagel maintains that "Mama learns German" promotes female empowerment by removing mothers from an often limiting and conservative family and social structure. Frankfurt's private sector is active in a variety of formal and informal integration efforts, including sports and leisure programs and independent outreach initiatives.

NGOs, Opposition Parties Reject Hesse's Approach

6. (U) The Council For Foreigners in Hesse (AGAH), an umbrella organization of Hesse's local offices for foreigners and NGOs, disagrees with the Hesse initiative. While the group acknowledges that German-language education is essential for integration, they stress the need for a more comprehensive approach, including help for abused women as well as initiatives to prevent hate crimes and racism. The AGAH maintains that Hesse's budget cuts and single-minded focus on language threaten many of these goals. Illustrating the point, AGAH chairman Manuel

Parrondo quotes a government poster reading "Only somebody who speaks German gets into first class." The German word Klasse means both "grade" and "class", and Parrondo believes that the government's campaign implies that all non-German speaking foreigners are second-class citizens.

17. (U) Opposition parties in Hesse evince a predictable but strongly-felt resistance to the CDU program. SPD education spokesman Lothar Quantz condemns the recommended exclusion of foreign students from classes because of insufficient language skills, saying that "these kids require more support rather than less." The FDP has a similar position. Hesse's Green Party criticizes the CDU's lack of dialogue with NGOs and churches on integration, and sees a growing alienation between the Hesse government and groups working with foreigners. Opposition parties continue to work against Hesse's integration program in the state legislature but are unable to overcome the CDU's absolute parliamentary majority.

COMMENT

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18. (SBU) Hesse's initiative is the latest chapter in Germany's continuing struggle to assimilate its immigrant population while preserving a distinctly German cultural identity. Although some Germans may view immigration as a threat to the "traditional" German way of life, the vast majority recognizes the need for integration. German cities and industries already depend heavily upon an immigrant workforce to power their economies, and Germany's demographic outlook (an aging population coupled with a dwindling birth rate) underscores the need for a continued influx of workers to support the economy and maintain the country's extensive social welfare system. How the integration of these immigrants should proceed remains undecided, however, and the speed and scope of Germany's efforts in this area is and will remain part of the political discourse for the foreseeable future. END

COMMENT.

BODDE